

TOM JACKSON inhales deeply before beginning his second audio log cheerily.

TOM

Good morning, everyone! This is the personal log of Tom Jackson, day 524 in space. It's a balmy -454 degrees outside, the sun is shining, and I'm going to die in 9 days.

Tom pauses. He moves on.

TOM

But, in the meantime, I spent the morning doing bits and bobs around the ship. I was checking to see if anything came back on, or if there was anything that seemed different or new, any changes to my. . . *situation*. I took a look at the i-internal wiring where I installed the module from earlier on my flight, but I didn't see anything wrong, so it's gotta be something I can't see. . .

He trails off, lost in thought.

TOM

I think the mistake was trying to get well past Mars on methane alone? We all thought it'd be too slow to get past the astroid belt - I mean, we knew that. We just didn't think the backup fuel wouldn't kick in.

I wish it had. A bit.

TOM

(clearing his throat)

Although, I will admit, it's kinda nice to stop worrying about everything. You know, I don't have any obligations, I don't have anything to do anymore. Any people to. . . try to get to understand, you know. Well, anything I HAVE to do, anyway. Even-even before the incident, I was always working on this ship, following NASA's schedule, keeping healthy, doing those workouts and-. Now, what's the point? You know, I caught myself yesterday saying, "Well, now I have to go check on-" and stopped dead, realizing, oh, I don't actually.

Weird to have spent almost two years doing the same thing, day in, day out, and. . . suddenly, not to do any of that, you know, cold turkey. I thought I'd miss it more, find myself, you know-

(chuckling)

-wandering the ship pressing buttons that are offline, trying to keep a schedule.

But I don't know, I think it's good for me to have no direction. For a bit. I- well, I haven't really had that since I was a kid. Once high school hit, you know, I was on track for college, and then there was college, and then working at- at JPL til this training and this mission. Everything became kinda planned out,

that next step always in my mind, so I never drifted o-or didn't know what was coming.

Tom laughs.

TOM

I even married my first girlfriend from college. Everything was so normal and formulated for so long, there was very little trial and error. I just did what I was supposed to do, every time.

I think this happens with a lot of people. You know, everyone just sort of. . . lives. Does that make sense? Like, we're all just struggling to keep living that nothing else really gets though.

You know how a balloon, when it's not quite filled up all the way to full, it's impossible to pop? Cause that tension's not there? It was like that, it was like I was scared that if I really filled up, that. . . it'd be way easier for me to break.

Except, you know, every so often. . . every so often something would be sharp enough and I would get this little hole poked to see the outside world through. And I think that might be what killed me in the end. That little view of what life could've been like had something been different, that hole I couldn't actually fit

through, he little life that made me
just a bit. . . deflated.

He takes a pause here. He's telling the truth. And
don't stop now. . . He clears his throat and goes on.

TOM

I think a lot of that- I think a lot
of that view of a happy life came when
I was a kid. I was a really happy kid,
for a long time, and I don't think it
occured to me that that would ever
stop. I grew up in this little house
in Missouri, outside of a small town.
It was just my mom, my dad, and me. It
was. . . well, we were technically
living in what used to be the old
slave's quarters next to this big corn
farm next door. But when we were
there, it was just two houses, one big
and one small, backed by a shared
backyard - which was just a patch of
grass - then corn fields running down
to the creek that circled the whole
place.

My family had been there my whole
life. Uh, the big house was abandoned
until I was 5, when a family moved in
and fixed it all up, started the farm
goin' again.

Tom's voice softens. He's gone.

TOM

The Patterson's.

He goes on, remembering himself.

TOM

Old money - which in Missouri is never good - big family; I think they had. . . fffffive kids? The dad was an alcoholic, which caused problems for the boys, especially when the mom died a few years after the move. They were mainly on their own. I remember my dad shakin' his head the day they moved in, sayin' something about the type of family that must be, the kind that would move into such a house). But I just liked hearing the sounds of a family next door and, you know, seein' the smoke from the chimney rise in those blue winters that we get- that ya get up there.

And as poor as we were, as hard as my folks had to work, I felt as light as that smoke, all the time. My dad was a mechanic, as I mentioned, and my mom worked as a waitress in a diner just down the way from us. They both worked early and late, so I was left alone a lot, spent my days puttering around the house, inventing games an-and worlds. My parents were usually gone, never fought, didn't really speak much to each other. There was love there, I'm sure, but in-in the way that some people have it? Which is quiet and just between them and most other people can't really see it.

Nothin' wrong with that.

I mainly was left to my own devices. You know, my parents were just so bone tired and beat down by working. And I- I knew they loved me, but there were no trips or gifts or anything. Which was fine, I didn't need it. It's funny, some kids might've missed that attention. And I. . . honest to god, kinda liked being left alone to figure out the world around me as a kid. There was plenty to do around the house and the yard. . .

Everything goes soft.

TOM

(with impossible tenderness)

Especially when David moved in.

Something shifts when he says that name. Like a dam has just got its first chip in it. . .

TOM

(with reverence)

David was the youngest kid from the rich family next door. We were inseperable from the moment we met. You know, as happy as I was growing up to be left alone for the most part, it made me such a- a quiet and shy kid, but David. David was the most alive person I've ever seen. He'd look at you, even as young as he was, he'd look at you, and you could see every bit of him just- just *sparking* and *glowing* as he formulated his idea of you and you found yourself just *praying* it was gonna be good.

The first time I saw him, I had this feeling that I had to follow him, no matter what, that he was gonna lead me to something great. And s-so for years, growing up, that's what I did.

His voice tells us there was no other option.

TOM

He went to an all boy's boarding school in the city, so I didn't see him except in the summers, where we'd be together for the three months. My parents said that we were like peas in a pod, which made David grin, so I- I took to repeating it a lot. Though back then, we were so young, I wasn't really quite sure what that meant.

He's lost for a moment.

TOM

(bright as the sun)

God- those summers! Those bright and shining Missouri summers, picked up again each year when he would get back, like a penny on the concrete, left us breathless, filled us up. I mean, we'd spend *all day* running through the corn fields, and- and jumping through creeks, laying out in the sun for hours! He always had some new adventure for us, some story he was telling about heroes and villians, giants and swords and these battles, and he would always make a place for me in with them. And I was just happy

to tag along and watch him. . . you know, light up the world around him.

After a beat, Tom's back. He's not shining anymore. You can almost hear the smile leaving.

TOM

The school year, and school, for that matter, was pretty lonely for me. I didn't have any friends. We were poor and we lived on the wrong side of the tracks, so I was. . . I don't know, I suppose I was embarrassed. I didn't want anyone to see our, you know, threadbare washing hanging in the yard or judge my parents for their boots or jeans, so no one really ever came over.

I was quiet, too- I never quite fit in. You know, I got made fun of a lot. I was never properly bullied or anything, but I think people thought that I was stupid?

There's an embarrassed laugh.

TOM

I worked very, very slowly and methodically. Ummm. . . the truth was, up til high school, I hated school. I could never really focus on the paper, especially in-in English. When there was any kind of test or essay or anything, I would get distracted fairly early on and just draw the infinity sign constantly on my papers. At the top of the paper, I remember,

near the date. My pencil just kept following the groove that it had dug in the page and I never knew when to break it off, so I didn't until I had to turn my paper in, which would be always totally blank except for this. . . marking at the top. Next to, usually, where I'd forgotten to write my name, which is a crime.

And then, when I'd get home, there'd be no one to help with anything.

I remember, there was one time in art class in what must have been. . . third grade? Where we had to draw a portrait of our families and I was so worried about mine being ugly that I totally froze up and I couldn't draw anything at all- you know, good or bad- and when I turned the paper in, I had only managed to draw my half of my dad.

That got me a couple years in school counseling.

The one thing I was good at was math. I took to it like a duck to water. Numbers just made sense to me, I could- I could picture it all in my head. My parents were confused by that. How could I struggle with reading, how could I get, you know, such a low grade in-in English, but do long division at 7? I'm not sure they ever figured that one out.

I was thinkin' bout people makin' fun of me an- and David would as well, but it was always. . . different. He would always laugh at me when we would play over summer, 'cause he could never do math and he thought it was so funny that I loved it. He would make me recite times tables to him as we swung on the tire swing in his back yard and he would laugh and laugh as I rattled them off, the biggest laugh you ever heard, and it would- I remember- it would scare the big crows up to fly up out of the corn, which always scared him to fall off the tire swing.

He trails off, lost in the memory, lost in it all. When he comes back, he's sober again, no longer drunk on David and what once was.

TOM

But after David, ummm, went away, and I stopped seeing him, around the time I hit high school, I was back to being as quiet as ever. Luckily, in high school, I actually began to enjoy school. I loved the routine and the grades and seeing the same people, walking the same hallways every day, I-. I learned more about the world and how to live in it like everyone else. I even began to make friends once I started caring to, I- I started on the baseball team, you know?

I- I think high school was when I became adjusted to who I was gonna become. This- this kid that I've been

talking about, this kid that I was in grade school, middle school- was content to be alone and loved being in his own little bubble- I don't. . . don't recognize him? Like, I- I- I know that that's me, but it just feels like at some point, the timelines split, and that's a different me, and- I don't know. That doesn't really make sense, but. You know, I think I turned into someone who was great at school, and who hated when that routine fell out from under him in the summers, a kid with some friends. But it's- it's funny, I still always felt just- just a bit outside everyone else. As close as I got to people, I still couldn't quite be like them.

I remember, once, I must've been. . . seeeventeen? Cause it was my senior year. . . Yeah, sevetneen. And I was this party and I, uh, I dont do well at parties, I dont think. I-I dont engage very well, you know, I feel like I'm just on the outside of something, some cool kid bubble I cant quite break into and I'm trying too hard to get to and I'm somehow pushing it further away when I try. So I'm at this party and it was at one of my richer friends' houses, so it was just on the edge of town and it was about as close to the city as I'd been before.

You know that moment where you're having fun and you know people there

and you're singing and you're dancing and you're laughing and drinking. And then are these moments where nobody's talking to you. And you're just standing there in the corner. And you sort of. . . zone out. . . and. . . all the noise of everyone talking and laughing and the music playing around you, it sort of fades out. And all of a sudden, the only thing that you're aware of- and I mean, people could be talking two feet from you and the only thing that you're aware of- is that they're not talking to you. And you sort of have this moment that hits you where you go, "Oh, I wanna be anywhere else but here". But- but you're not quite sure where that would be and if- and if you knew once, you can't remember it and so you just sort of stay and stick it out and try to have something that's close to fun and you know hope that maybe when you look back at this, it wont be as bad as it was living it. So yeah.

So I was at this party and, all of a sudden, there was one of those moments and I got so sad, so quickly, you know? So I, umm. I ducked out of the party. And on the house was this big, wrap around porch and just outside were these corn fields, like the ones that were by my house, and so I just sort of, you know, stared out at the night. There were all these stars over an old dirt road that stretched out forever into the corn fields. And it

was kinda nice, I suppose, cause everyone was laughing and there was music playing behind me and I wasn't trying to be a part of it.

And I remember, a friend of mine came out at one point, handed me a fresh beer, and leaned on the porch rail for a moment in quiet. She looked at me and said, "Why don't you come inside now?"

And I was looking at her, right? This girl from my class, this- this good friend of mine, and I realized that she didn't. . . she didn't know this was what I needed. She didn't really know me as well as all that. And suddenly that feeling of needing to be somewhere else intensified, but I- I still didn't have anywhere to go, and that feeling had nowhere to go, so I just. . . I shrugged. And I remember she kissed my cheek before she went back inside. I closed my eyes at that and I didn't open them again until I knew that she'd gone back inside and I heard the door close behind her.

For some reason, when I think about high school, that's my- that's my strongest memory. I don't- I don't know why, I'm not sure why.

Tom laughs again, but it's different. Almost nervous.

TOM

You know, talking about all this, thinking it over. . . I miss being that little kid, because I didn't want anything but what I had. And I didn't have to pretend I fit in because I knew I didn't. I lost him somewhere, and while I think that that, I don't know, maybe needed to happen, I miss him out here.

I refuse to believe, even now, that I don't get to be him again.

I'm glad I'm talking about it though. It feels good to take all my lasts and leave all my firsts.

Tom sighs.

TOM

Til next time. Bye.